

CRANSTON SCHOOL COMMITTEE MEETING

WEDNESDAY, JANUARY 30, 2008

WESTERN HILLS MIDDLE SCHOOL

400 PHENIX AVENUE

EXECUTIVE SESSION: 5:00 P.M.

PUBLIC MEETING: 6:30 P.M.

**PUBLIC BUDGET WORK SESSION: IMMEDIATELY FOLLOWING
PUBLIC MEETING**

MINUTES

A special meeting of the Cranston School Committee was held on the evening of the above date at Western Hills Middle School with the following members present: Mr. Archetto, Mrs. Greifer, Ms. Iannazzi, Mr. Lombardi, Mr. Stycos, Mr. Traficante, and Mrs. Tocco-Greenaway. Also present were Mr. Scherza, Mr. Nero, Mr. Votto, Mr. Balducci, Mrs. Lundsten, and Mr. Laliberte.

The meeting was called to order at 5:10 p.m. It was moved by Mrs. Greifer, seconded by Ms. Iannazzi and unanimously carried that the members adjourn to Executive Session pursuant to RI State Laws PL 42-46-5(a)(1) Personnel and PL 42-46-5(a)(2) Collective Bargaining and Litigation (Food Service Contract; Administrators' Contracts and Possible Litigation – Caruolo Action).

Chairman Traficante reconvened the meeting at 6:50 p.m.

The roll was called and the Pledge of Allegiance conducted.

I. Executive Session Minutes Sealed – January 30, 2008

Moved by Mr. Lombardi, seconded by Mrs. Greifer and unanimously carried that the January 30, 2008 Executive Session minutes remain confidential.

Chairman Traficante reported out that no vote was taken in Executive Session.

II. Adjourn to Public Budget Work Session

Moved by Mrs. Greifer, seconded by Ms. Iannazzi and unanimously carried to adjourn the public meeting to the public budget work session.

Superintendent's Presentation of the 2008-2009 School Budget to the Cranston School Committee

Chairman Traficante stated that tonight the Superintendent will propose a budget for the Cranston Public Schools for the 2008-2009 school year. He noted that there would be public budget sessions held on February 4th at Western Hills Middle School at

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7:00 p.m., on February 11th which is the regular School Committee meeting at 7:00 p.m. at Western Hills Middle School, and on Monday, February 25th, at 7:00 p.m. at Western

Hills Middle School. If necessary, there is a snow date on February 27th for the February 25th meeting, at 7:00 p.m. at Western Hills.

Chairman Traficante explained that the School Committee could ask questions for clarification only and that the focus tonight would be the Superintendent's presentation of the school budget.

Superintendent Scherza thanked the School Committee for allowing him and the administrative staff their budget proposal for the next fiscal year. He prefaced his remarks by stating that it isn't all going to be pleasant, but they have been very diligent and honest; and they feel that it represents their needs.

He stated that all the materials, the power point and the budget proposal, are on the Cranston Public Schools' website at www.cpsed.net . At subsequent meetings, as the School Committee deliberates and ultimately adopts a budget, that will be put on the website the next morning.

Superintendent Scherza read the following statement: To all of the people of Cranston, to all of our teachers and to all of our students, I have a very big apology to make. Last year I made the mistake of not asking for all that was needed to effectively operate the Cranston School system this year. By that I mean, I reduced, along with the executive staff our \$135 million identified budget, a bare bones budget, to \$131 million at great pain and cost to the school department. The School Committee had to cut even deeper. Under the provisions of Rhode Island General Law 16-2-11 along with the policies promulgated by the School Committee along with the provision of my employment contract, I am duty bound to operate a district that puts the educational needs of children before all else.

Last year we let the politics and concerns other than the best

interests of our children supersede our fundamental statutory duty. I will not make that mistake again. Tonight we put before you an honest representation of the needs of Cranston's students. There is no fluff, no fat, no matter who may claim they can find it in there. It is based on a level funding of our current model of education based on the information that we know as of this moment.

I am sorry if it sounds caustic or harsh; it's not intended to, but it is what it is.

Make no mistake about it; we are at the cusp of a point in time at which we can say that it is really not a good time to be a child living in Cranston going to the Cranston schools right now. Services are being cut; class sizes are being increased to the maximum. Supports for teachers and students are declining. We are asking our educational

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professionals to be accountable and to perform little miracles, and at the same time we are not providing them with the adequate resources to perform the job that we expect of them.

Our schools are not failing, and I will fight anyone who wants to argue that. Our schools are not failing in any way as many of the media and political entities will have you believe. Our educators are doing more and better than we ever have for an ever- expanding and diversified population than at any time in the history of this Country. To the contrary, the schools are not failing but rather the adults and the

political leaders are beginning to fail our students.

If our children are even among the priorities of this community, please someone explain to me how we arrived at the fact is that not one penny of new fiscal support was directed to the schools for the current fiscal year despite the fact that taxes in this community were raised to the maximum level allowable by law. If children were among the priorities in the city budget then I would say the budget should show it. I have said many times that budgets reflect the community's priority more than anything else. This administration is fully committed to the children of our community.

Our ability to meet even minimum requirements as well as the goals we feel are professionally appropriate is waning. We are at the point where the ambitions of the political entities as put forth in the many numerous unfunded mandates at the federal, state and local levels have far outdistanced the levels of support that accompany them.

It is increasingly more difficult to meet the demands of the many mandates that are being dropped on to us.

This community, I have to admit, has supported us well. Taxpayers have paid an awful lot, and I believe that our teachers, administrators and support staff have responded very well insomuch as our students have performed at generally high levels. However, I am now disheartened to report that as a district we are beginning to slip backwards. We need to stop the momentum and get back on track. Our consistently high levels of achievement have been chronicled by the Rhode Island Department of Education, the Rhode Island Public Expenditure Council, and many others. In short, the Cranston

schools have proven that the taxpayer investment that has been given to support the schools has been paying high dividends even though we continue to have one of the lowest per pupil expenditures in the state. However, we are stagnant at best and more likely regressing in many areas. Our two high schools recently have been categorized as being low performing, the first time in our history, and are about to receive state intervention. SAT scores have fallen below previous levels. What it amounts to is where you put resources you get results. We have not had the resources; forget the results desired. We know some of the things we have to do. I am sure that our teachers and some of the educators in the audience will agree with that. We have not been provided the resources to accomplish them.

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The Cranston School Department must continue to recruit and retain the best teachers and administrators if we are to continue our successes. I say this despite recent year cuts in personnel at literally every operational level. We have lost more than thirty teaching positions in the last two years alone. The ranks of teaching assistants, secretaries, custodians, and administrators have been reduced below bare bones levels. Despite our efforts, we are faced with one of the tightest budgets imaginable. To make it work, we will have to continue with higher-than-desirable class sizes, no new textbooks, reductions in services and programs, and more lay-offs at literally all levels of the district.

The administration has, I honestly believe, put together a budget request that is painfully inadequate, but one which addresses the bare minimums of both existing and emerging state and federal requirements. The central office staff, our building administrators, and district administrators have worked very hard; and they attempted to make some very heavy cuts even to get to this point. We actually did this for a number of reasons. We feel it is our duty, and we have to be responsible. It is also an attempt to spare the School Committee from having to move forward alone. We will continue to be there to work with the School Committee. I know that I am preaching to the proverbial choir to most of you here and to the School Committee, but I ask the committee to join this administration in changing the mind set of this community and ask that they join the administration in fulfilling their obligation as outlined in Rhode Island General Laws 16-2-9 and 16-2-10 and to make the hard decisions that will best serve the interests of children of Cranston and reverse the trends that have resulted in large part from the recent string of inadequate budget supports.

Superintendent Scherza and the executive staff presented the power point presentation to the general public.

Chairman Traficante referred to slide No. 15, Budget Analysis 2008-2009 and asked Mr. Balducci to really emphasize this slide. He stated that the general public has to get a grasp of what Mr. Balducci is saying. The administration is making a large assumption that they are going to be successful with the City of Cranston in the current year to get an additional \$4 million added to the base, and Mr.

Balducci commented that Mr. Traficante was correct. Mr. Traficante went on to say that for every dollar they don't get adds to the \$8 million problem. In assumption No. 2, the administration is assuming again that they are going to get a 5% increase in the base which is approximately \$4.4 million. Again, every dollar the district doesn't get in terms of the \$4.4 million adds to that \$8 million problem. Chairman Traficante reiterated that he wanted the general public, especially the parents of this City, to realize that the School Committee has got to find at the current time if everything goes as Mr. Balducci is saying, \$8 million in cuts in the current proposed budget. Mr. Lombardi added that if neither assumption No. 1 or assumption No. 2 goes through, the number is more like \$16 million in cuts. If what happened this year happens next year, it will be \$16 million.

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Superintendent Scherza said that he, too, was going to highlights those points brought up by both Mr. Traficante and Mr. Lombardi. This is based on the assumptions that the administration has put forward. Those are best case scenarios. Just this afternoon he was at the State House. The feeling there is that the districts will receive some kind of a cut, never mind level funding. What administration has presented here tonight is based on the current educational model based on the current contracts which does not reflect what may happen in the future. Mr. Scherza apologized for the doom and gloom sound of it, but they want to be honest that this is what it takes. This is not the Cadillac; this is to do the bare minimum on all things that is

required of the district without short changing students.

Chairman Traficante stated that he could not emphasize enough that the School Committee needs their support more than ever when dealing with the administration and the City Council not only in the current year but also next year. If they don't get that kind of support, and they don't fulfill the kind of obligations that Mr. Balducci previously mentioned, then finding \$8 million to \$10 million in cuts in the school budget will be devastating to this school department.

Chairman Traficante acknowledged Cranston City Councilmen Lupino, Barone, and Santamaria. He thanked them for attending this work session. He hoped the presentation had some impact on the City Council. The committee will go forward from here.

III. Future Meeting Dates

Chairman Traficante noted the future meeting dates at the beginning of the meeting.

IV. Adjourn Work Session

Moved by Mr. Lombardi, seconded by Mrs. Greifer and unanimously carried that the work session be adjourned.

There being no further business to come before the work session, it was adjourned at 7:50 p.m.

Respectfully submitted,

Andrea M. Iannazzi

Clerk